

THE CHRISTIAN FREEMAN

AND

Record of Unitarian Worthies

BEING A HISTORY OF THE UNITARIAN REFORMATION OF RELIGION IN EUROPE AND AMERICA
DURING THE LAST THREE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS.

With some Account of the most Notable Works written by Unitarians.

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FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE ON CURRENT BELIEFS.

An article entitled "A 'Note' of Interrogation" in "Fraser's Magazine" has attracted a good deal of attention. It is an article which it is better to quote from than to characterise.

"It always seems to be a fact ignored, or put out of sight, that for no one of our beliefs, religious, physical, moral, scientific, have we any dependence but—the character of God.

"A very great deal of foregone conclusion, of what, as it appears, is untrue to fact and to feeling, is talked, for instance, as to belief in a future state—that this is 'instinctive,' 'intuitive,' the fruit of the natural craving of man, &c. &c.

"But, whether this be so or not, whether there are 'instincts' or 'cravings' for a future state now or not, surely it is a complete fallacy to reason from them to the existence of a future state.

"Surely the 'presumption' of an immortality 'grounded' merely on unsatisfied 'instincts,' is a fallacy. It is another thing to say: 'A perfect God, whose only design can be to lead every one of us to perfection, put those "instincts" into us. He never leaves any work unfinished. He is invariable, and without a shadow of turning. Therefore He will enable each one of us to fulfil in another state those aspirations after perfection which are necessarily left "unsatisfied" in this—because this world is not perfect, and cannot be made perfect till all mankind agree to make it so.'

"Why then is there a future state?"

"Because God is.

"For no other reason.

"And let us drop the word 'a future state.'

"What 'future state'?"

"An eternal life which, beginning here,

shall lead each and every one of us to finite perfection, and therefore to happiness.

"Because there is a God, therefore there is this eternal life for each and for all of us.

"For no other reason.

"And let us also drop the word 'a God.'

"What God? that is the question. And no one answers it. It is only 'because God is'—the perfect God—that we shall have eternal life.

"It is said of the French soldier in an expeditionary force, that he always wants to know where he is going, what he is doing, why he is suffering. Except on the condition of letting him know this, you will not get out of him all he can give.

"And how can a man give his best unless he knows, unless you will try to find out for yourselves and for him, what is God's plan for him in this world and in the next.

"Is it not a simple impertinence for preachers and schoolmasters, literally *ex cathedra*, to be always inculcating and laying down what they call the commands of God, and never telling us what the God is who commands, often indeed representing Him as worse than a devil? 'Because I am God, and not man.' But you represent Him as something far below man, worse than the worst man, the worst Eastern tyrant that was ever heard of.

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength.' Ah, from the mouth of Him who said those words, they are indeed 'the first and greatest commandment.' He who went about doing good, who called all of us who are weary and heavy laden to come to Him—who towards His cruel torturers and murderers felt nothing but, 'Father, forgive them, they know not what they do'—He might well say, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God,' for he needed not to explain to us his character. But—and

what a descent is here!—for *us* to lay it down as a *command* to love the Lord God! Alas! poor mankind might easily answer: ‘I can’t love because I am ordered—least of all can I love One who seems only to make me miserable here, to torture me hereafter? Show me that He is good, that He is loveable, and I shall love Him without being told.’

“But does any preacher show us this? He may *say* that God is good, but he shows Him to be very bad. He may say that God is ‘Love,’ but he shows Him to be *hate*, worse than any hate of man. As the Persian poet says: ‘If God punishes me for doing evil by doing me evil, how is He better than I?’ And it is hard to answer. For certainly the worst man would hardly torture his enemy, if he could, for ever. And unless God has a scheme that every man is to be saved for ever, it is hard to say in what He is not worse than man. For all good men would save others if they could.

“A poor man, dying in a workhouse, said to his nurse after having seen his clergyman: ‘It does seem hard to have suffered so much here, only to go to everlasting torments hereafter.’ Seldom has the feeling, which must be that of half the world, been so simply expressed.

“Take some of the most familiar instances of mistakes arising from not understanding the character of God.

“That God regards suffering as good in itself, that He pays well those who inflict it on themselves, is the basis on which was founded a very large polity in the Roman Catholic Church.

“That God has so let go man as to become essentially wicked, for which He has instituted no other system of help except letting another pay the penalty for man, was the foundation of another theory of religion sometimes called ‘Evangelical.’

“That this barbarising doctrine does not make man barbarous, at least not very, can only be because men are so much better than their God.

“That God has made a scheme of salvation and damnation by which a certain number of His creatures are ‘saved’ everlastingly, a certain number ‘damned’ everlastingly, is considered by all the orthodox millions of the Church which calls itself ‘Christian,’ whether Roman Catholic, Greek, or Protestant, as the fundamental doctrine, or one of the fundamental doctrines, of their faith.

“Then the (so-called) ‘Liberal’ steps in and says—‘No, God would not be so ill-

natured.’ But if you ask the ‘Liberal’ you will find that he does not suppose God has made any other plan—any plan for conducting each and all of us to perfection; he simply supposes that God has no plan at all; or that, if He has, we can’t find it out.

“It is said that in Japan every one in whose house a fire originates, whether accidentally or not, is beheaded without appeal; that is, no one looks at his ‘intentions.’

“Is not this something like the government of God? If one has not had the wisdom to prevent the fire, does He then less permit the fire to burn us and our children? Does he ‘forgive’ us the consequences? But there seems in all present teaching of Christianity an ineradicable prepossession that ‘forgiveness’ means the removal of future eternal punishment, that God has nothing to do with laws regulating or registering results in this world, but that He keeps, as it were, a rod in pickle for us in the next; which rod in pickle is to be averted, it really seems to be taught, by a certain number of ceremonial observances.

“It is of no use saying that God is just, unless we define what justice is. In all Christian times, people have said that ‘God is just,’ and have credited him with an injustice that it is impossible to conceive, *e.g.*, that He condemns to ‘everlasting fire’ for not being baptised little babies who certainly could not get themselves baptised. What is the horrible and wholesale infanticide compared with this? Not even that of the Frenchwoman farmer of babies who poured vitriol instead of milk down the babies’ throats and dipped their heads in boiling water. For she certainly did not mean to do this for eternity.

“But would God be the more just, even though He does not damn the little babies, if He does not *save* them—if He has no scheme by which the little babies, who were never asked whether they would come into this world or not, are to be brought to perfect happiness?

“Is it not the happiness of God, so far as we can conceive it, the only type of what happiness is? And why has God happiness? Not because He can do what He likes. But because what He likes is good.”

Long ago we wrote that Miss Nightingale was Unitarian in her theology. No one will deny this now. She has sent a second article to *Fraser’s Magazine*: may she send many.

FREE RELIGION.

THIS term has been adopted by certain persons to express religion without doctrines, without standards of authority, without supernatural origin or development. The word "free" refers to the absence of everything local, formal, temporal, and implies an opinion that all "religions" are yokes unsuited to the healthy growth of the spiritual nature. Free religionists profess an adherence to the plainest truths of natural religion, such as are common to Jew and Pagan, Mahometan and Christian. Universal brotherhood overshadowed only by the Divine Fatherhood is the sum of their theology. Love, which is the end of the law, the fulfilment of the Gospel, and the substructure of whatever wisdom there is in any system of religion, is held by them.

It is extremely difficult to define the position of those who deal mostly in negatives. They have so much freedom that they cannot be bound to any definite statement. Indeed, so jealous of liberty are they that they refuse to be endorsed by one another; each man preferring to stand on a platform of his own making. But it would not be just to dismiss so impalpable a thing as Free Religion with the remark that there is nothing in it.

What, then, is religion, freed from local, temporal and conventional associations? Let us talk plain English. It excludes so much of the Bible as has reference to local or transitory needs; that is, all the Old Testament except those passages which inculcate love to God and man without admixture of Jewish tradition and theology; all the New, except the general statements of the truths already known to men; leaving us many of the psalms wherewith to chant God's praises, and the Sermon on the Mount wherewith to govern our action towards men. Adopting "free religion," we shall no longer be perplexed by miracles, by Christ's special devotion to the lost sheep of Israel, or by his "reputed" resurrection and ascension. The sacraments will become interesting relics of superstition; prayer will be shorn of the incentives of special promise; Christ will no longer be an interpreter of God to men.

The prime failing of free religion is that it requires men to live in a vacuum. No man can be religious apart from conditions of time and place and circumstances. Love to God is founded upon our conception of him, and yet our noblest conceptions are imperfect and incorrect, being

largely the result of such education as the times give us. If a man lives in a philosophic age, he will have—whatever his position in regard to prevailing schools—a conception of God tempered by philosophy; if in a superstitious era, a disposition to multiply supernatural evidences of God's power; if he is a sensualist or a savage, he will give to his divinity something of his own attributes; if he is a highly educated independent thinker, living in the freest age and in the freest country in the world, he will still be unable to see God as he is, but must be content with dull reflections from earthly mirrors.

How, then, if we cannot so much as think of God apart from prejudice resulting from time and place, are we to serve him in absolute freedom? Not, as it seems to us, by rejecting all external religion, all local and transitory forms, usages, and partial truths, but by using these as the stepping-stones of spiritual attainment.

Recognising the need of partial truths upon which to climb towards the complete truth, we shall immediately inquire if God has not foreseen this need and provided for it. Is it not supposable that He, knowing us to be so much the creatures and dependents of time and circumstances, and foreseeing what would be the needs of each age of the world, would impart just that corrective and guiding knowledge which would help us to mount? Would he not from time to time inaugurate dispensations of truth suited to the advancing growth of those who received his aid? We may admit that the patriarchal, the Mosaic and the prophetic systems of religion were local, temporary expedients, but none the less the true means of holiness for the race *during the period of their use*. The same is true of Christianity; it is less encumbered with externals than were the former dispensations, yet it is a practical adaptation of religion to the spirit and the events of this latter day. But Christ has set the highest possible standard. The lives of the most godlike will never rise higher than that.

There are some who think that men have in themselves that wisdom which will lead them into all truth; who feel no need of a revelation, or of a rescuing Friend, or of counsel given in answer to prayer; but their freedom seems to us no broader than the liberty with which Christ makes free, a liberty which accepts the "local, formal, temporal" help of a condescending Father. "Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."—*Christian Union*.

